

## **A contemporary look at William Peter Blatty's "The Exorcist"**

**Una mirada actual de El Exorcista, de William Peter Blatty**

**Uma análise contemporânea de O Exorcista, de William Peter Blatty.**

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### **Abstract**

Without delving into the tales told around the fire since time immemorial by our ancestors, throughout our modern history there have been entertainment products that have transcended into popular culture and inevitably become ingrained in our very being. Whether it is Dracula, Jaws, The Shining, or Psycho: all of them have the essence of terror embedded in their core. Whichever ones have been present in our lives to a greater or lesser degree, many will recall a legendary scene or recognize some aspect of these works, and without a doubt, The Exorcist, in my opinion, is among their greatest examples.

**Keywords:** Horror cinema, The Exorcist, religious fanaticism, American literature, horror literature, religion, William Peter Blatty.

### **Resumen**

Sin incurrir en los relatos contados en la hoguera desde tiempos inmemoriales por nuestros antepasados, a lo largo de nuestra historia moderna, hay y hubo productos de entretenimiento que han llegado a trascender en la cultura popular de las masas e inevitablemente se impregnan en nuestro ADN. Llámese *Dracula*, *Tiburón*, *El Resplandor* o *Psicosis*: todos ellos con la máxima del terror adherida a sus entrañas. Cualesquiera han estado, en mayor o menor medida, presentes en nuestra vida, muchos podrán recordar alguna escena mítica o identificar algún aspecto de estas obras y, sin ningún tipo de duda, *El Exorcista*, a mi parecer, está entre sus mayores exponentes.

**Palabras clave:** Cine de terror, El Exorcista, fanatismo religioso, literatura norteamericana, literatura de terror, religión, William Peter Blatty.

### **Resumo**

Sem entrar no mérito das histórias contadas à volta da fogueira desde tempos imemoriais pelos nossos antepassados, ao longo da nossa história moderna, existiram obras de entretenimento que transcenderam para a cultura popular e inevitavelmente se enraizaram no nosso ser. Seja *Dracula*, *Tubarão*, *The Shining* ou *Psico*: todas elas têm a essência do terror embutida no seu âmago.

Independentemente de terem estado presentes nas nossas vidas em maior ou menor grau, muitos recordarão uma cena lendária ou reconhecerão algum aspeto dessas obras e, sem dúvida, *O Exorcista*, na minha opinião, está entre os maiores exemplos.

**Palavras-chave:** Cinema de terror, *O Exorcista*, fanatismo religioso, literatura americana, literatura de terror, religião, William Peter Blatty.

The author constructs an oppressive atmosphere that gradually intensifies until reaching its final climax. From the prologue -with the nameless man excavating antiquities in Iraq (Del Pino, 2021), already foreshadowing the ancient threat soon to emerge- through a first act introducing characters seemingly unrelated to the madness that is about to unfold, and finally culminating in a conclusion where they are dragged into the most primordial abyss, William Peter Blatty (1975) proves himself an absolute master in the way he presents it all.

Despite the possible perception of the work as merely sensationalist thanks to its film adaptation (although, in my view, an excellent one nonetheless), the novel conceals far more than a careless first glance might anticipate. Let us look a little deeper beneath its surface, shall we?

It weaves together themes such as religion, atheism, crisis of faith, and the infinite unconditional love of a mother for her daughter. Another writer might easily have fallen into simplistic resolutions and handled these matters with crude obviousness, yet Blatty presents them in an everyday and natural manner through characters burdened with flaws, much like you and me. And this allows us to identify with them completely, sweeping aside whatever prejudices we might have carried into the story.

Through his execution, he succeeds in allowing the intrinsic terror of the work to seep into our subconscious with a sense of genuine realism, and that is a remarkable achievement for a text dealing with demonic possession and exorcism in our own era.

Good and evil have existed since time immemorial, and in my opinion the novel says a great deal about our species. It distills our essence, at times tender and compassionate, at others cruel or malicious, but always imperfect.

The first example appears the moment one begins leafing through the opening pages, where the author presents a sort of prefatory collage composed of apparently “random” passages, each drawn from different eras and protagonists: from simple Biblical verses to transcripts of conversations between gangsters boasting about the torture and execution of some unfortunate victim, all the way to a brief quotation describing the horrors of something that has always accompanied civilization, eternal war, as ancient as the world itself.

The common thread uniting all these fragments is none other than authentic and genuine evil (Vidal-Mestre et al., 2023), an aspect which, in my personal view, is born with us and will die with us.

Setting aside the physical suffering endured by Regan -the possessed child and the greatest victim of this story- the “being” inhabiting her delights in generating lies with which it distorts reality in order to inflict suffering upon others. It rarely acts without first manipulating a third party into succumbing to its influence, and moments in which it openly displays its own power are relatively scarce. And when it does act directly, I repeat, it does so primarily to influence and destroy the individual psyche; direct physical harm is uncommon. It revels in playing with our humanity, and without it -without us- it would probably have no reason to exist at all. So then... what are we to infer from all this? What is the author trying to tell us?

*The Exorcist*, as a book, is not truly about the demon itself (Viñuales and Cabañeros, 2024). Rather, it transforms evil into a force dependent upon human fragility in order to exist, terrifyingly personified through its antagonist.

As a counterpoint, the true protagonist can only be Father Karras, a man filled with evident contradictions and, in my opinion, the best-constructed character in the novel. He has lost his faith, and this causes him profound anguish: his purpose as a priest is thrown into question, and to make matters worse, he lives burdened by guilt over having abandoned his elderly mother.

The presence exploits all of this when Karras visits Regan. It knows that the priest longs for the possession to be real, because that would confirm the existence of true evil and, by extension, of the God he so desperately needs. His faith would rise as high as a mountain. But, of course, the demon understands this perfectly. It has come to play, and it will not allow that certainty to arrive so easily.

During the tests and interrogations Karras conducts with the child, the entity offers him certain... crumbs of truth. It spins a web of lies, just enough to prevent him from advancing, but never so much that he abandons the pursuit altogether. Because, in my interpretation, every movement for the demon is merely an appetizer, a form of enjoyment in which it prepares the table for the main course: the exorcism itself. In truth, the child (Cuesta, 2026) possesses nothing especially unique; she appears chosen at random and used merely as a vessel through which terror may spread around her until the circle is complete. This constitutes the final stage of the demon’s reason for existing, where it will subjugate everyone without exception and swell its putrid belly upon our despair.

Anyone uncertain about immersing themselves fully in this work should cast aside all prejudice and simply do it. At the very least, they will encounter a narrative capable of sending their pulse racing (Juegas, 2023).

It is worth remembering that every Spanish-language edition published before 2022 was censored (Cadena SER, 2023; Distópolis, 2026; Doctor Peligro, 2023) because of the historical moment in which the novel first appeared. Entire sections were omitted, including the most bizarre material, such as the black-mass rituals and some of the novel’s most iconic scenes -has anyone mentioned the crucifix?-, along with numerous corrections and revisions later introduced by the author himself in more modern editions. It is a luxury to read an intelligent bestseller that rarely falls into simplistic moral

binaries.

To conclude, I leave you with a quotation from Father Lankester Merrin taken from the novel itself, though in reality William Peter Blatty borrowed it from a text by John Henry Newman (1801-1890), cardinal and theologian (2024):

...We are aware of the order, constancy, and perpetual renewal of the material world around us. Although each of its parts is fragile and transitory, and though its elements are restless and migratory, it nevertheless endures.

It is governed by a law of permanence, and though it dies again and again, it always returns to life. Dissolution does nothing but give birth to new forms of organization, and one death becomes the mother of a thousand lives...

Thus, every hour bears witness to how fleeting and yet how secure and certain the great totality truly is. It is like an image upon water, always the same though the water itself flows ceaselessly.

The sun sets only to rise again; day is swallowed by the darkness of night only to be reborn from it as pure as though it had never faded. Spring becomes summer, and through summer and autumn becomes winter, only to return more certainly still, triumphing over the grave toward which it had hastened since its first hour. We mourn the blossoms of May because they must wither, yet we know that May will one day avenge itself upon November through the turning of that solemn circle which never ceases, teaching us, at the summit of our hope, that we must always remain balanced, and in the depths of desolation, that we must never despair."

Father Merrin, who joins forces with Karras in an attempt to save the child during the exorcism, embodies composure and wisdom acquired through years of austere living, isolated from the world in distant lands bathed in sunlight and covered in sand. He offers us this beautiful prose which, although not written directly by William Peter Blatty himself, exemplifies Merrin's character with near-perfect precision, and astonishingly seems as though it had truly been conceived in order to give life to the character, rather than the other way around.

Unlike the others, Merrin already knows the being tormenting Regan: years earlier he confronted the same darkness while performing an exorcism lasting several months upon another victim, eventually succeeding in expelling the entity. Yet the entity has not forgotten him, and from within the darkness it waits patiently for the moment to reclaim the opportunity once denied to it.

And, thus, the novel begins: vengeance has been set upon the table.

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